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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1426
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 235

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) In their first meeting with Ambassador Hill, Christian religious leaders emphasized that continued emigration of Iraqi Christians abroad remains their primary concern. They stressed that, although security remains worrisome, the motivation behind current departures was economic, coupled with the allure of living in Europe. The leaders requested U.S. support in helping to create job opportunities for Christians in Iraq and assisting in the reconstruction of schools and hospitals within their communities. The leaders noted that they are receiving adequate financial support from the government for their churches, as well as "moral support" from their Iraqi Muslim counterparts, including Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Ambassador Hill told the leaders that he too would defend Iraqi Christians publicly and encourage Iraqis to as well. End summary.

Emigration is the Key Concern

[1](#)2. (SBU) On June 9, Ambassador Hill hosted a lunch for representatives of each of Iraq's largest Christian denominations, including the Patriarch Mar Addai II of the Assyrian Church, Bishop Shlaimon Wardouni of the Chaldean Church, Archbishop Jean Sleiman of the Roman Catholic Church, Father Pere Thaer of the Syriac Church, and Pastor Maher Fouad Daoud of the Evangelical Church. (Note: The head of the Armenian Church, Archbishop Avak Asadourian, was also invited, but was traveling outside the country. End note.) The five leaders agreed that the emigration of Iraqi Christians remains their primary concern. Archbishop Sleiman characterized the flow of Iraqi Christians abroad as an "exodus." Bishop Wardouni stated that what had happened since 2003 was the worst emigration in over 100 years. Pastor Daoud complained that approximately 85% of his congregation had gone abroad in the past year.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In their discussions of emigration, the Christian leaders agreed that security was only one concern and that it had improved markedly. Bishop Wardouni noted that the Church of St. Peter/St. Paul had been restored in the Doura neighborhood of Baghdad and was drawing more than 150 parishioners for Sunday Mass. Wardouni told the Ambassador that during the past Sunday's Mass he had performed three baptisms and 15 First Communions. Although he did not fail to mention the issue of security, Wardouni said that the lack of jobs in Iraq, not persecution, was driving Christians to leave. He complained that Christians could not get government jobs because the hiring at various ministries was conducted in a sectarian fashion. Patriarch Addai and Father Thaer described the problem more broadly, saying that

Christians lacked not only economic opportunities, but also adequate schools and health facilities. Father Thaer also emphasized that Iraqi Christians were generally well educated, but had been forced to take jobs for which they were over-qualified. (Note: The lack of economic opportunities for Christians and the impact this has on emigration was one that religious leaders living in the Kurdistan region also raised with Poloff in the past month (REF A). Poloff noted during these conversations the millions of dollars in U.S. government spending to assist these minority communities in the areas of education, infrastructure, and micro-loans. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) The Iraqi Christian leaders were equally critical of liberal Western immigration policies, arguing that the resettlement of Iraqi Christians to Europe and the United States only encouraged more people to leave Iraq in search of better opportunities abroad. Patriarch Addai told the Ambassador that he had had a meeting with the German Foreign Minister in which the FM had proposed to help 10,000 Iraqi Christians move to Germany. The Patriarch said he had told the FM not to follow through with the plan, as it would encourage yet more emigration. Bishop Wardouni was equally adamant that European countries were only encouraging Iraqi Christians to look abroad rather than focus on how to improve the situation in Iraq. All five religious leaders emphasized that, rather than focus on resettlement, Western countries should focus on helping to rebuild churches, schools, and hospitals as well as create job opportunities for Christians.

Support from the GOI and Sistani?

¶5. (SBU) When the Ambassador inquired about how the Government of Iraq was responding to their concerns, Patriarch Addai was surprisingly laudatory. He said that the Assyrian Church does not have any problem with the government and that the resources provided to the Christian endowment at the Ministry of Awqaf were sufficient. Bishop Wardouni praised Prime Minister Maliki's efforts to protect the Christian community in Mosul last October, saying that his actions had allowed the Christians displaced by the violence to return to their homes. He was also happy that the Christian endowment had been able to provide guards for Babil College, the lone Christian seminary in Baghdad, and the "heart" of the city's Christian community. Only Pastor Daoud of the Evangelical Church dissented from the praise for the GOI, arguing that the Christian endowment of the Ministry of Awqaf had placed impossible conditions on his church to be officially recognized and be able to receive government support. Specifically, he said that in order to be recognized, the Evangelical Church had to receive the agreement of all of the officially recognized Christian churches in Iraq, something that was not forthcoming. Daoud's comments led to an argument over what the
e6rnQ%=91 micro-loans, and church restoration.
HILL